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Résumé de l'article

Cet essai explore la position qu'occupe la photographie dans l'art contemporain et plus particulièrement la manière dont elle oscille actuellement entre ce que nous pouvons nommer le 'tableau' et le 'document'. En vue de s'engager dans ce débat, l'auteure prend en considération trois plans méthodologiques : a) elle effectue une lecture co-textuelle de photos de Jeff Wall et d'Allan Sekula en fonction de leurs titres, b) elle s'attarde aux divers traitements des éléments picturaux, vestiges d'une longue tradition artistique et c) au plan métatextuel, les mêmes images sont examinées selon des considérations contextuelles plus vastes. Ici, les différences entre deux manières de travailler en photographie contemporaine — le *tableau* singulier et le (pseudo-) montage documentaire — deviennent claires. Dans une rétrospective historique, l'auteure fait remonter ce *paragone* photographique actuel à l'art méridional néerlandais du XVIème siècle. Pour conclure, elle soulèvera la question pratique du marché de l'art.

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Photography Today: Between *Tableau* and Document

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1. An Iconotextual Reading

Consider two photographs. The first one was made by Jeff Wall in 1993 and is entitled *A Sudden Gust of Wind* (*After Hokusai*) (fig. 1). It is one of his most famous pictures, as its selection for the cover illustration of the artist's 2005 Tate Modern survey catalogue amply testifies. The other one is Allan Sekula's *Container Facility Idled by Docker's Strike, Greenock* of 1989/92 (fig. 2).

Figure 1 - *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)*

Figure 2 - *Container Facility Idled by Docker's Strike, Greenock* of 1989/92

Presented next to one another, as isolated images, they yield a few striking similarities: in terms of subject, both photographs find their settings in an obviously post-industrial landscape and in both images a batch of papers is being blown about in the wind. From a formal perspective, a great analogy regarding the interplay of vertical and horizontal lines can be discerned in both photographs. They are both divided compositionally by a horizon line in the landscape. In Wall's

picture, it is the windswept tree that sets the image into a vertical motion. The same dynamic is generated by the upright structure of the container crane in the background of the Sekula photograph. One could quite cautiously conclude that, thanks to this shared compositional structure of crossing lines, there are similar pictorial strategies at work in both images.

Pushing this singular reading of the Wall and Sekula photographs still a little further, it is obvious that our perceiving eye starts to look for more hints about exactly how these pictorial strategies are developed. In order to obtain more information about the contents, one must observe each image's co-textual setting. The first thing to do is to (re)read their titles, and then to explore the text-image relationship at play in both works. The first part of the caption of Wall's photograph refers to the image's apparent subject matter: a sudden gust of wind rises, which blows clothes and hats upwards, as leaves fly from trees and documents irreversibly escape from a folder inside which they were carefully contained. The second section of the image's title — offered not insignificantly between brackets — reveals that the picture has found inspiration in the work of the 19th Century Japanese print-maker Hokusai, in particular his *A High Wind in Yejiri* of ca. 1831-33 (fig. 3). The artist himself has confirmed this on several occasions (De Duve, Pelenc and Groys 1996: 122).

Figure 3 - *A High Wind in Yejiri* of ca. 1831-33

In the Wall image, the first section of the title cultivates a certain amount of enigma regarding the picture's contents: it might contain a message about the world, an element that is fortified through the fact that the place where that 'sudden gust of wind' occurs, is obviously on the periphery of the city. The second part however opens up the path towards an interaction with an artistic tradition. The caption of the Sekula photograph is much more factual: it does not contain this explicit reference to an artistic tradition, only to a situation in the life-

world, which it appears to describe in a rather deadpan way, namely 'a container facility idled by [a] dockers' strike'. Although no protagonist can be discerned, the text-image relation is quite clear-cut: we do not need any personage in order to understand that this wharf is temporarily out of use. Strikingly indeed, and contrary to the Sekula image, the presence of some four personages in Wall's image only heightens its mystery. Thus, a basic iconotextual reading of both photographs already makes clear that the initial, isolated, strictly 'pictorial' impression of them proceeds towards a greater extent of diversification when we take their accompanying captions into consideration (see Montandon 1990 a and b).

Not so long ago, Rosalind Krauss — recalling Roland Barthes — underscored the "inherently hybrid structure" of the photographic image (Krauss 1999: 294). Although Barthes made his argument on several occasions, it is interesting to bring to mind his somewhat lesser quoted study called *The Fashion System*, where he clearly argued — while referring to the systematic use of captions accompanying press and fashion photographs — that language attributes one single meaning to an image that, as such, would invite an infinite amount of interpretative possibilities. Barthes affirms: "The image freezes an endless number of possibilities; words determine a single certainty" (1983: 13). And he adds in a footnote: "That is why all news photographs are captioned." (*Ibid.*)

Words, Barthes says, are able to guide our perception of an image that, without them, would be much more diffuse. In this sense, specific captions heighten our knowledge of an image as much as they confine it. In addition, they emphasize certain meaningful elements of an image rather than others, and by so doing they structure its meaning. Yet, whereas this is a useful way of working in fashion and press photography, Barthes warns us that the words accompanying a given image can impact that image, in terms of the initial fascination it arouses in our perceiving eye. When combined with visual stimuli, Barthes concludes, speech serves to "'*disappoint*' [*décevoir*] the image". (1983: 17)

1.1 *Absorption* Versus *Intervention*

What could be disappointing about the images considered above? What could Barthes possibly have meant by his striking statement that a co-textual gathering of word and image can be disappointing in respect to the meaning of the image? I have sketched two possible models for photography in art today on other occasions (Van Gelder 2007a and 2007b). I will rehearse those briefly here, in order to examine subsequently the possibly 'disappointing' character of both ways in which current artistic practice employs the photographic medium. I have named one model 'absorptive', the other 'intervening'. These two models are to be seen rather as didactic instruments. For, it is only in

their extremes that they hold true. Yet, even if there are many crossovers between them, they do not seem altogether reconcilable.

I understand the 'absorptive model' as a way of working with photography in which the photographic image is employed as a medium — medium being understood in terms of an instrument (camera) and a carrier (paper or another support) — in order to make a renewed kind of figurative painting[1]. In Anglo-American literature, these images are often called *tableaux* or pictures. The term picture, as it was employed by Gilbert and George (Dannatt 1994: 66), is an interesting and useful one. For it indicates that, in this model, we are not simply dealing with paintings as they were made in the 1860s and before, but with a long-standing tradition of image making to which these paintings belong. We are talking about a composite way of 'painting through photography', in which painting has absorbed photography in order to renew itself. In a certain way, the photograph and the camera that makes it, have replaced the brush, paint and canvas as a new painterly medium. It is in this sense that one can speak of a 'pictural' paradigm for photography today. I insist on this notion of the 'pictural' because I believe, as I will argue further on, that the other model, the intervening one, is not anti- or a-*pictorial* — but it arguably is anti-*pictural*.

From a methodological perspective, the absorptive model consists of a way of working with the photographic medium that is first and foremost concerned with the realisation of a composite, synthetic photographic *tableau* or picture. Before anything else, it focuses on the iconic potential of the photographic image, that is, on photography's mimetic capacity to represent or figure a given reality. Absorptive photographs, as I will also clarify further on in this text, revert to a single-image aesthetic. They communicate visual messages that verge towards a certain kind of poetic discourse. By contrast, I understand the intervening model to be a way of working with the photographic medium that is not so prominently preoccupied with this iconic capacity of the image. In this model, it is believed that a photo first and foremost has something substantial to say about the world surrounding us because of the fact that it is, in the first place, a material inscription or index of the reality it displays[2]. Since the photo is so intimately and physically embedded in the everyday reality that it documents, the intervening model holds that photography cannot but interfere in our lives. Here, before anything else, photography's task is to start up an analytic reflection and debate on our social and economic condition, with the explicit hope that probably — and to some this is totally utopic — this artistic reflection can effectively change something to our society. Intervening photographic images tend to hover towards the political.

In the absorptive model, by contrast, this activism is much more attenuated or, at times, largely absent. Instead of intervening in the real life situation, of which it is an inscription, the photo-*tableau* to a certain

extent reduces its own socio-political potential in favour of confronting us with a somewhat noncommittal image that sometimes even contains a certain epic dimension. In this sense, the picture or photo-*tableau* also absorbs the reality, of which it is the mirror image, in order to translate it into a more aestheticizing and freestanding visual discourse. Absorptive or pictural images thus appear more ambiguous. Yet, to the adherents of the absorptive model, this ambiguity is a necessity for art: they believe that when an image lacks compositional synthesis and therefore is judged by them as too exclusively analytic (as is often the case in the intervening model), it becomes too one-dimensional. In a discussion with Jean-François Chevrier from 1990, Jeff Wall argues that:

> There has to be a dramatic mediation of the conceptual element in art. Without this mediation you have only concepts on the one hand and pictures on the other. Images become a decorative completion of an already fully evolved thought. They are just illustrations. So they are boring, there is no drama. But what makes dramatization possible? I think it is a program or a project that was once called *la peinture de la vie moderne*. (De Duve, Pelenc and Groys 1996: 104)

The statement could have been an implicit or anticipatory critique of the intervening model, and especially of Allan Sekula's way of working — a critique which Chevrier would subsequently undertake. It is striking that, in a debate, held on April 23rd, 2006, Jean-François Chevrier described Allan Sekula's work as nothing more than "illustration"[3]. Chevrier added to the discussion by proclaiming that Sekula's photographs, in contrast to Wall's pictures, constitute too much of a "visual impoverishment" in respect to the traditional standards of what can be considered visual art. In many ways recalling the position of the modernist connoisseur of art, Chevrier interestingly stated that, in Sekula's work, there is not "something to look at", meaning that his photographs are to be understood as nothing more than a preparatory "study [*une étude*]", whereas Wall's images can be seen as *tableaux*.

Wall's intensive use of digital interventions in his photographic images heightens their composite character and thus fortifies their status as well-balanced *tableaux*, containing the right amount of drama. Sekula's compositional scheme is much less reliant on the single image itself and is more a matter of combining various images and texts. From the perspective of those who believe that one *should* make one single, finalized *tableau*, Sekula's work gets criticized for not being able to surpass its fragmentary character as preparatory study.

1.2 *Exploring the '*peinture de la vie moderne*' Today*

Images that are part of the intervening model, such as those by Allan Sekula, are sometimes said to simplify the complexities of the subjectivity that is at stake in works of art. In a discussion between Catherine David, Jean-François Chevrier and Benjamin Buchloh,

included in the catalogue to Documenta X, Sekula and Wall's diverging artistic attitudes are linked to questions of subjectivity and globalization in contemporary society. Chevrier pleads for an art that is able to propose a view of a subject that is somehow integrated and stable, which for him is obviously — however paradoxical this can sound — part of a globalized society. For him, when the artistic approach is too overtly "analytic", the "processes of subjectivization" that implies a renewed involvement in "the surrealist unconscious" and "the question of intimacy", can become blocked (Buchloh, David and Chevrier 1997: 641). What Chevrier seems to be saying is that the unconscious and the innermost personality of the maker of the image *should* be at play in the dynamics of representation and *should* influence our way of experiencing the work. When we seemingly minimize or treat this additional, subjectivizing dimension of drama less centrally, the image is too poor in quality and thus found to be not artistic enough. Here again, in retrospect, Chevrier could be implicitly referring to Allan Sekula's intervening way of working.

Yet the absorptive model, with its synthetic, composite images is not free from the danger of becoming too one-dimensional. Very much embedded in ambiguous meanings, these images run the risk of operating in an autonomous aesthetic sphere where they can become the victim of their own ambition: instead of reinventing an artistic tradition — and one can hardly think of a more crucial task for art — they can somehow end up being locked up in past and persistent traditions. It has recently been argued by David Green that pictures such as those by Andreas Gursky, clearly to be considered as part of the absorptive model, are "simply too open to fetch any meaning" (Baetens and Van Gelder 2006b: 124).

Intervening photographs, of which Allan Sekula's images can be seen as the contemporary icons, are described today as examples of critical realism in art. Sekula's photos, which exist on the verge between art and documentary — and thus create a kind of pseudo-documentary — reflect on the possibilities for the visual arts today to deliver an "act of criticism" (Rosler 1989: 322), to use the words of his fellow-American artist Martha Rosler who used them to describe her own *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-75). The challenge for artists shaping the intervening model consists of finding ways in which art, in particular photography, can be critical about contemporary social questions without succumbing to a plain or overtly partial political statement. What comes to the fore as crucial in the quest of artistic images to avoid the trap of the slogan or of propaganda, is the successful employment of their cryptic potential. Critical realism, as Jan Baetens and myself understand it in respect to the work of artists such as Sekula or Rosler, is "a practice, a research method rather than an artistic style" (Baetens and Van Gelder 2006a: 9). It is a way of searching to understand the social reality by 'making critical notes' about it, in a visual and textual combination, which I revert to further on in this essay.

In the above-mentioned 1990 discussion with Jean-François Chevrier, Jeff Wall does not distance himself from what he describes as a critical art in respect to his own work. He understands that his art does contain a certain activism, but that it is in favour of a mediating, synthesizing relationship between the textual and visual components in a work of art. Crucial in this respect is, as described above, what Wall understands as the dimension of drama in each work. That example of how photographic art can be dramatic in the right sense of the term, is to be found in the artistic tradition itself, namely in 19th Century modern painting, which — according to Wall — can be reinvented today through photography. To that extent, Wall sees great precursory examples in figures such as Walker Evans or Robert Frank, photographic heirs to the *peinture de la vie moderne*.

In a recent article on Wall, the Dutch art critic Sven Lütticken has argued that the margin between anachronistically continuing a long-standing tradition and effectively reinventing it is very thin. With *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)* (fig. 1), Lütticken writes, Wall has become quite a literal appropriator of Hokusai's *High Wind in Yejiri*, (fig. 2) thus to a certain extent undermining the image's critical potential (Lütticken 2004: 9). Jan Tumlir's analysis of Wall's enigmatic 1991 picture, *The Stumbling Block*, describing its compositional scheme in terms of "a 'history painting' like Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* updated by the very latest technological possibilities" (Tumlir 2001: 112), appears to confirm — even if unintentionally — Lütticken's critique.

2. *The Pictural* Versus *the Pictorial*

Jeff Wall's works are most often displayed as single-image transparencies in light boxes. Sekula's photos always partake in what he calls a 'larger montage': photos are shown in an exhibition room, inserted in books, slide projections, outdoor installations — every single photo that is part of his body of work relates to the other, even if it is not shown, and it also interacts with his written texts. Sekula thus constructs a photographic archive. Wall's absorptive *tableaux* repeatedly dig into the pseudo-documentary and hover towards what I have named the intervening. Inversely, Sekula's intervening *pseudo-reportages* are so strongly embedded in the pictorial that there are instances when they approach the pictural mode of Jeff Wall. It is for this very reason that a comparison between their ways of dealing with the pictorial today is so fascinating.

In order to explore further the question of the pictorial in their work, I want to examine briefly some of their photographs that are dealing with what I call an 'iconography of cleaning up'. As such, I want to indicate that both find one another in their investment in the pictorial, that is, in trying to rethink and reinvent a painterly artistic tradition. Yet, just as much as they are able to meet one another on the matter of cleaning

up, that is exactly the point where they also part ways again. This has to do with the strongly pictural or synthesizing aspects of Wall's work, largely absent from Sekula's.

There is a striking resemblance between *Wall's Morning Cleaning, Mies Van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*, 1999 (fig. 4) and Allan Sekula's *Shipwreck and Worker, Istanbul* (fig. 5), an image that is part of the larger photo-sequence *Titanic's Wake* (1998/2000).

Figure 4 - *Morning Cleaning, Mies Van der Rohe Foundation, Barcelona*, 1999

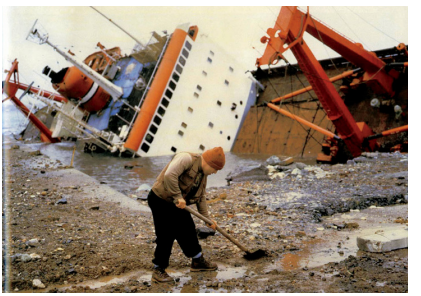

Figure 5 - *Shipwreck and Worker, Istanbul*

In both instances, one encounters a worker that is immersed in an activity that renders him completely oblivious to everything else taking place around him. In a recent article on Wall, Michael Fried has pointed to this very fact: "the viewer, he argues, is made to feel that the man bending over his squeegee is oblivious even to the one indisputably great event [...] depicted in *Morning Cleaning* — the dramatic influx of warm morning light." (Fried 2007: 517) In the case of Sekula's image, the 'great event' taking place is of a much less enigmatic nature: it is obvious that a hard working labourer is completely disregarding a ship wreckage. Clearly, the nature of the 'great event' taking place differs substantially between both images.

In *Morning Cleaning* (fig. 4), Jeff Wall confronts us with an image representing a specific laborious activity: the cleaning up of a rarely-

used exhibition pavilion. Compared with Sekula's *Shipwreck and Worker, Istanbul*, Wall offers a completely different view of working conditions: here, labour is aestheticised, obliterating the nasty part of the true working conditions of most individuals. It is for this very reason that Sven Lütticken has described *Morning Cleaning* as a failure:

> *Morning Cleaning* is genre *tableau* blown up to monumental proportions, which makes one think of the more conservative elements of nineteenth Century art. It is as if Wall has distilled from classic-modern photography — which, as a continuation of traditional painting, has become more and more important to him — a 'humanistic' approach of the 'ordinary man'. (Lütticken 2004: 9)

We will return to the question of 'humanism'. For now, it is important to point out that Wall's window-cleaner seems to have everything under control. The space he is cleaning is not even dirty; it seems more as if this man is occupying himself, filling up the boredom of everyday reality. There are no particular stakes, and there is no obvious *work* to be done — everything is stable.

Figure 6 - *Housekeeping*

Wall's *Housekeeping* (1996) (fig. 6 above) is also programmatic in this respect. The woman leaving the room has clearly worked, but the job is now finished. Wall has indeed confirmed Jean-François Chevrier's remark that *Housekeeping* shows us the moment when

> The bedroom, newly spick-and-span, is about to be frozen into an image of vacant space, an empty, lifeless interior, where all traces of having been lived in, been used, have been carefully rubbed out, effaced. (Chevrier 2001: 181-182)

Just like *Housekeeping*, *Morning Cleaning* tells a story of a mastered universe. There is no threat and nothing to fear. The background pond is peaceful, the motionless water sweet. Mies van der Rohe constructed the Barcelona Pavilion in 1928-29 for a Weimar regime that wished to make up for the disasters of World War I. It was demolished in 1930, only to be rebuilt long afterwards, entirely true to its original model (it was reopened in 1986). Michael Fried has argued that the political

resonances of this recent reconstruction are those of restoration: "the Barcelona pavilion," he ventures, is "the product of an effort to "repair" history at least to a certain extent" (Fried 2007: 510). And so — as I have also argued elsewhere (Van Gelder 2007b: 79) — by metaphorical displacement, *Morning Cleaning* comes to be read as the result of a programmatic effort to make up for an artistic tradition that has been in crisis since the 1860s and seems to have been completely discarded in the late 1960s. *Morning Cleaning* is a reconstruction of the historical *tableau*, the isolated painting.

Whereas, on the one hand, Michael Fried fully champions that evolution in Wall's work, on the other hand Sven Lütticken is highly critical of exactly this development:

> When Wall in *The Storyteller* (1986) replaced the *bohémiens* and *demi-mondaines* of Manet's *Déjeuner* by *not-so-white-trash*, one could still see this as a second actualisation of Manet's modernisation of the classical *fête champêtre* — although Wall's composition is in fact more anecdotal and therefore more reassuring, the little group with the heavily gesticulating woman on the left side of the image and the man on the right who is staring right in front of him have a rhetorical eloquence that is alien to the work of Manet. Certainly, as of the late 1980's, Wall reverts to the academic repertoire of gestures, the exact one with which Manet broke. When he brings this to the fore drastically, it can turn out well, as in *Outburst* or, in a very different register, *Dead Troops Talk*. But his art is increasingly positioned in the middle, the *juste milieu*. Works such as *Morning Cleaning* make one think of Meissonier rather than Manet. The sentimental use of traditional elements, which invites devoted contemplation, gains it from the actuality of the anachronism. By placing himself ever more exclusively in a tradition of Great Art and Eternal Beauty, Wall accepts he becomes a producer of comforting myths. (Lütticken 2004: 9)

3. Text and Image, a 'Disappointing' Relationship

According to Sven Lütticken, "blowing up photographs to 'art historical' proportions" is a way to "inscribe oneself into a tradition" (2004: 9). This deliberateness, almost a programmatic effort, 'to inscribe oneself into a tradition' might exactly be the point where Allan Sekula departs from Wall's single-image aesthetic. To Benjamin Buchloh, he confirms: "the key question for me is whether the meaning structure of the work spirals inward toward the art-system or outward toward the world" (Buchloh 2003: 41).

Thus, while both artists are reflecting on a longstanding pictorial tradition, their stakes diverge sharply: Sekula neither wants to repair that lost tradition nor does he wish to display an image of history that makes us believe that it is possible to rebuild things in order to make the disasters of their previous destruction undone. When using or appropriating historical references, Sekula rather makes them come out as a "disassembled movie", as he has stated to Carles Guerra (2006:12), in a recent interview.

In a statement accompanying the installation in front of the Vienna Chamber of Labour of some of his photographs under the title *Shipwreck and workers* — of which *Shipwreck and worker, Istanbul* becomes the hidden image; for it was not shown there — Sekula has written: "A worker shovels debris in front of a freighter blown up against the shore: the Angel of History absorbed in his task, disguised as one of Breughel's peasants." (see Huck 2005)

In the well-known passage from *The Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin describes the Angel of History as willing to interfere in past events, which he has come to see as "one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage" (Benjamin 1968: 257). The Angel wants to put everything back in order, but he cannot, for his wings are lifted above by a strong blast of wind from heaven.

In *Titanic's Wake*, a book he published in 2001, Allan Sekula has confronted the image of *Shipwreck and Worker, Istanbul* with a wing-like assemblage of two severely damaged plush puppets made by coal dock workers in the port of Vancouver (fig. 7).

Figure 7 - *Assemblage Made by Coal Dock Workers, Vancouver*, part of *Titanic's Wake* (1998/2000)

In this diptych, it is as if the Angel has simply landed on earth, has escaped from the storm in Paradise that is called progress. He has taken off his wings in order to start up a frantic way of working, to engage in the labour of Sisyphus, as Pieter Bruegel the Elder has indeed demonstrated in several of his paintings. Seemingly totally oblivious to the 'pile of debris before him growing skyward', he paradoxically appears all the more engaged in it. History cannot be repaired, Sekula seems to suggest; there is no control or stability, only an endless way of fighting against the piling wreckage. Here, the reference to a pictorial tradition — in this case to Bruegel instead of Hokusai — is not made on the level of the co-text, but instead is part of a larger contextual relationship and interplay between texts and images in an entire *oeuvre* instead of a single work.

There is another level where both Sekula and Wall part sides. Wall does write about his own work, but his art critical texts seemingly operate in a separate discursive system — art criticism — and thus do not immediately appear to relate to his own images. Yet, they do. Sekula himself has remarked that in Wall's work, "the text actually operates, Oz-like, from behind the curtain, as it continues to do for most contemporary art" (Buchloh 2003: 41). He refers in this sense to Wall's famous argumentation in his catalogue essay for the 1995 MoCA (Multimedia over Coax Alliance) exhibition *Reconsidering the Object of Art*, where the artist writes that certain forms of post-conceptual photography offer us a "'restoration' of the 'concept of the Western Picture' or the traditional *tableau*" (Buchloh 2003: 41). It seems that, in calling up the 'certain forms' of photography, Wall is coyly rationalizing his own work.

Sekula's use of writing is dramatically different. His implementation of the intervening model for photography takes on a methodology that aspires to abolish the discursive schism between the critical essay and the artwork. He confirms to Carles Guerra:

> [As] soon as you create a relay between a text and an image, you undermine any purist claims for either text or image. The image is no longer the truth upon which the text is a commentary or subjective gloss, nor is the text a pinning down of a truth that is otherwise elusive in the image. (Guerra 2006: 20)

Figure 8 - *Shipwreck and Workers* (Version 2 for Leuven), 2005

He therefore rather uses hidden captions, as has been illustrated in the installation of *Shipwreck and Workers* (fig. 8) at STUK in Leuven in 2005. There, the captions of all the billboards could only be found on the bottom right hand side of one of the text panels that was part of the installation. Anyone who was looking specifically for titles accompanying the photographs came out rather 'disappointed', yet in a highly distinct way from the previously described 'disappointments' of Jeff Wall's pictures. In Sekula's larger photographic archive, all images in some way relate to each other, and the same goes for his essays, which come

to clarify and grant complexity to the images at the same time. Wall's synthetic *tableaux*, with their accompanying titles, come out as an ever more clear-cut reference to a specific lost tradition that is — according to those who share his opinion — in desperate need of restoration. In other words, his titles 'disappoint' because they fix one single meaning to an image that, without them, would probably have come out in a much more analytic, or sometimes even critical realist way.

3.1 *Flashback: Rethinking a Humanist Legacy*

Both Sekula and Wall thus engage in a long-standing pictorial tradition. Yet, from an iconological perspective, it is clear that the connotations surrounding their work differ radically. Benjamin Buchloh has remarked, in the conversation with Chevrier and David, that he is not sure whether the two approaches have ever been reconciled or are at all reconcilable.

> I wonder whether they shouldn't be conceived as two necessary urgencies, which remain separate. (Buchloh, David and Chevrier 1997: 641)

According to Buchloh, demanding from art that it be able to reintegrate subjectivity and analyse global transformation at the same time, might be asking too much. Buchloh ends by reproaching Chevrier for a certain arbitrariness: when Jeff Wall succeeds in reintegrating the subject but fails on the side of global analysis, Chevrier appears to "find that acceptable." (Buchloh, David and Chevrier 1997: 641) But by contrast, Buchloh objects to Chevrier to the effect that, when "there's an analysis without the subjective dimension," — and here, no name is mentioned, but in the light of Chevrier's recent devastating critiques of Allan Sekula's work, his name can, in retrospect, easily be filled in — "for you it's a failure" (Buchloh, David and Chevrier 1997: 641). The subjectivity at stake in Sekula's images is indeed much more fragmented and dispersed[4].

According to Chevrier, as he has clarified in the above-mentioned debate at Art Brussels, a lack of ambiguity is what makes Sekula's art 'naïve'. One could object that, in Wall's work, like for example *Morning Cleaning* or *Housekeeping*, an overinvestment in ambiguity makes the work hover towards a certain spectacularization — be it deliberate or not. In the Documenta discussion, Buchloh continues with a historical look back and finds that this irreconcilability "may have already been a problem in the twenties" (Buchloh, David and Chevrier 1997: 641). But in a certain way — and here Sekula's mentioning of Pieter Bruegel reads as a subtle hint — the problem appears to have existed for a much longer time. Already in the 16th century, a debate in the Lower Countries — which highly implicated Bruegel and his work — appears to have been raging.

As David Freedberg has explained, some kind of a *paragone* must have existed at that time between those, such as Abraham Ortelius in

the first place, who defended Bruegel's painting as "natural", against the work of some other artists that were favourably described as "artificial" (Freedberg 1989: 57). From the perspective of these 'artificial' artists, of which the highly renowned Frans Floris was the greatest exponent, their approach succeeded most effectively in complying to the laws of *decorum* and *maniera*. In their view, they were the ones to work in a 'modern' way — that is, reviving classical art according to Italian Renaissance ideals — whereas painters of which Bruegel appears to have been a most prominent representative were described as populist, archaic and proclaiming a vernacular style.

From the point of view of artists such as Lukas de Heere, who wrote an *Invective Against a Certain Painter Who Criticized the Painters of Antwerp* (1656), it was an insurmountable mistake that Bruegel — if he was indeed that 'certain Painter' as specialists presume — did not adorn his pictures[5]. And, stronger still, the reproach was that Bruegel did not know how to do so or, at least not "how to adorn them within the bounds of decorum." (Freedberg 1989: 62) Freedberg rightly argues, following Ortelius' moving tribute to his friend which he included in his *Album Amicorum*, that Bruegel was very well aware of the laws of the then flourishing Italian humanism, but that he deliberately wished to insert these ideas in, what Freedberg names, "an unparalleled combination of humanist and popular themes." (Freedberg 1989: 63) In the choice of his subjects, like the *Fall of Icarus* or the *Tower of Babel*, and in his use of contemporary Flemish settings, Bruegel showed his commitment to the society in which he was living and in which he aspired — through his art and not by way of immediate politics — to make a difference.

Freedberg argues convincingly that there is an important difference between the apparently "immediately clear" meaning of Breugel's paintings (Freedberg 1898: 59) — they show scenery in a Flemish landscape depicted in a way that is true to the life of the people living there at that time — and their underlying meaning. The titles, one could say, offer hints to any number of possible deeper meanings of the work, but certainly do not fix them in any exclusive way. They rather appear to complexify the representative situation. As Freedberg clarifies, the latent meaning that is present in Bruegel's works, and which contains connotations that exceed the artistic tradition itself and open up to a socio-political debate, depends on "the wider contextual status." (Freedberg 1989: 59). In other words, one needs a "much wider knowledge of context" than the one offered by art history (Freedberg 1989: 58) in order to understand what is really at stake in Bruegel's work.

This broader contextual understanding of Bruegel's paintings is also crucial in reading Allan Sekula's work. For, like in Bruegel's work, the contextual elements one needs in order to grasp what is at stake in a particular image exceed the specific representation of that particular

image itself. The context is much larger and expands beyond the artist's oeuvre itself towards literature, theory, politics; as Freedberg concludes of Bruegel: "It goes beyond the issues of rhetoric *tout court.*" (Freedberg 1989: 62). When discussing Bruegel's *Magpie on the Gallows*, Freedberg comes to see it in terms of "a political allusion in the guise of a peasant picture." (Freedberg 1989: 64) The same can be said of *Shipwreck and Worker*, an image that offers a subtle analysis of contemporary society through the personage of a worker — "disguised as one of Breughel's peasants." (see Huck 2005)

What should we conclude from the fact that an art theoretical debate that seems to have run through the 16th Century circles, still appears — albeit in a transformed guise — to have a certain actuality today? Obviously, Wall would be on the side of the 'Romanists' — recall Sven Lütticken's remarks on Wall's 'humanism', mentioned above — those who are 'modern in a classical way'. Sekula's subtle preference for the vernacular, as opposed to the 'Romanist' perspective, is often seen as less erudite, less refined. But this view misses the irony and subtle humour at work in Bruegel's and Sekula's work. As a deliberate sign of his refined taste — as a sign of wit — Bruegel deliberately introduced 'errata' in his paintings, such as elbows and knees, that are largely exaggerated. Also in Sekula's photos, there appears to be a preference for characters that, in many ways, do not live up to the laws of contemporary *decorum*.

4. Photography and the Market

If, in finding two models for photography today, we are dealing with two necessary urgencies that cannot be reconciled, as Benjamin Buchloh says, it is important to raise one final question. I do it briefly, since it brings our discussion to a fourth level of consideration, one that extends the theoretical framework of this article and that has plainly practical consequences. The art market today clearly celebrates one way of working over the other. Both artists are of the same generation and have been steadily composing their body of work since the late 1960s. Each of them finds venues in the most important international group exhibitions, such as the documenta in Kassel. Still, Sekula has encountered many more difficulties, as much on the market as in entering into important public and private (or semi-private) collections. What will be the consequences of that, especially in an era when, as Daniel Birnbaum has so poignantly underscored recently, "the future of art is money" and where "the *biennale* has been eclipsed by the art fair?" (Birnbaum 2007: 54) This is a pressing issue indeed, and it might be too early to answer it properly. But it is one that should be kept in the back of the mind when looking at these works, as the future of the artistic use of the photographic medium will also depend on who will get the necessary funding to make the work. The question remains: what model will the market cherish?

Notes

1 The term 'absorptive' cannot but bring to mind Michael Fried's employment of it regarding questions of spectatorship and the way pictorial images address their viewers. In the context of the present essay however, absorption is not understood on the level of spectatorship, but on the level of the medium itself. Absorption in this essay has to do with an attempt to understand the way artistic disciplines evolve over time and what kind of images can be seen as belonging to a certain discipline at a given point in time. My intermingling with Fried's terminology is determined by the simple fact that I have so far been unable to find a better English word than absorption to describe the phenomenon I am trying to grasp here. Yet, this said, it is fascinating to find that nowadays, Fried himself is applying his own phenomenological theory of absorption to some of the very same images I range under the 'absorptive model'. See, among others, M. Fried (2005) "Barthes' *Punctum*." In *Critical Inquiry* 31 (3); especially p. 569.

2 Yet, it needs to be underscored that indexical or intervening strategies can be developed inside of the absorptive or iconic model, and vice versa. It is a matter of degrees and gradations.

3 This roundtable on 'Photography in the 21st Century' — whose participants were, besides Chevrier and myself, Johan Pas (moderator), Wilhelm Schürmann, Carles Guerra and Hans Op de Beeck — has not been published. A digital sound recording exists.

4 About the subjectivity that is at stake in Allan Sekula's work, see also H. Van Gelder (2007c) "Allan Sekula: The Documenta 12 Project (and beyond)." In *A Prior* 15: 223.

5 An English translation of this text can be found in Freedberg 1989: 65. I thank Joris Van Grieken for pointing my attention to this 16th Century debate.

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Abstract

This essay seeks to examine the position of photography in contemporary art or, more specifically, the way photography now hovers between *tableau* and the 'document' Three methodological levels are considered: first, a co-textual reading of select images by Jeff Wall and Allan Sekula in relation to their titles; secondly, an examination of their various treatment of pictorial elements, remnants of a long-standing artistic tradition; thirdly, at the level of the meta-text, the same images are confronted with a much broader contextual relationship. Here, the differences between two modes of working in contemporary photography — singular *tableau* and (pseudo-) documentary montage — become clear. A historical flashback traces this current photographic *paragone* back to 16th Century Southern Netherlandish art. Finally, the author raises a question pertaining to a fourth, practical level: that of the art market.

Résumé

Cet essai explore la position qu'occupe la photographie dans l'art contemporain et plus particulièrement la manière dont elle oscille actuellement entre ce que nous pouvons nommer le 'tableau' et le 'document'. En vue de s'engager dans ce débat, l'auteure prend en considération trois plans méthodologiques: a) elle effectue une lecture co-textuelle de photos de Jeff Wall et d'Allan Sekula en fonction de leurs titres, b) elle s'attarde aux divers traitements des éléments picturaux, vestiges d'une longue tradition artistique et c) au plan métatextuel, les mêmes images sont examinées selon des considérations contextuelles plus vastes. Ici, les différences entre deux manières de travailler en photographie contemporaine — le *tableau* singulier et le (pseudo-) montage

documentaire — deviennent claires. Dans une rétrospective historique, l'auteure fait remonter ce *paragone* photographique actuel à l'art méridional néerlandais du XVIème siècle. Pour conclure, elle soulèvera la question pratique du marché de l'art.

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